

**Finding common ground: An exploration of
the factors influencing coordinated and
collaborative community-based approaches to
services that support early childhood
development in Tasmanian rural communities**

Susan Maree Johns
MEd (Research), BAdVocEd, BEd

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to explore coordinated and collaborative community-based approaches to services that support early childhood development within three small Tasmanian rural communities, and to examine the factors that influence their development and sustainability. The study focuses specifically on linkages amongst groups and organisations that provide early childhood and family services and supports. Parental and community capacity building have been identified as critical to early childhood development. The emphasis is on developing community-based approaches to provide a support base and safety net for families with young children. Context shapes the development of community-based approaches, yet much of the early childhood literature is derived from urban communities, and it is not clear to what extent this is relevant to the rural context. Additionally, much of the literature examines linkages from an organisational perspective rather than a whole-of-community perspective. This multi-site, multi-method study uses a qualitative approach and case study methodology. Interviews are the key data source, along with observation and written documentation. Working within a community development framework, the study adopts a multi-layered view of community, and examines linkages from multiple perspectives.

Findings indicate that community-based early childhood linkages represent a continuum of activity, extending from cooperation to collaboration. Three interdependent factors influence the development and sustainability of coordinated and collaborative community-based approaches to early childhood development: social capital, leadership and environmental factors. The three influencing factors operate within a rural and community context. This is one of the first early childhood studies to explore the nature and influence of community leadership, moving beyond the traditional focus on individual leaders. The study highlights a link between influencing factors and community readiness. As communities move from early to later stages of readiness, internal leadership capacity develops, levels of social capital are increased, and communities develop

the capacity to harness and shape environmental factors to better meet identified need.

The study fills a gap in our knowledge of the development and sustainability of community-based approaches to early childhood development in rural communities, and will enhance the targetting of resources and supports, including mentoring. Implications include the need to increase skills, knowledge and supports in relation to the process of developing and sustaining coordinated and collaborative activity in rural areas. This includes greater attention to the provision of interprofessional learning with a rural component for undergraduates and initial trainees, on-site interprofessional development for voluntary and paid staff, and assistance in establishing and supporting appropriate leadership structures.

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